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DE RUEHPS #0495/01 1601707
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 091707Z JUN 06
FM USOFFICE PRISTINA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6197
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRISTINA 000495

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2015

TAGS: PREL KCRM PGOV PINR SOCI KIRF KDEM UNMIK YI
SUBJECT: RIFT WIDENS BETWEEN HARD-LINE AND MODERATE SERBIAN
ORTHODOX CHURCH FACTIONS IN KOSOVO

REF: A. PRISTINA 484
 1B. 05 PRISTINA 58 - C
 1C. PRISTINA 24
 1D. BELGRADE 879
 1E. PRISTINA 494

Classified By: COM PHILIP S. GOLDBERG FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Ever since moderate Bishop Teodosije welcomed Kosovo President Sejdiu to Decani Monastery on Orthodox Easter, the rift between Teodosije and hard-line Bishop Artemije has widened. After the visit, Artemije blasted Teodosije in the media, and the hardline Serbian National Council backed Artemije up. A letter from a Gracanica priest to the Synod in Belgrade criticizing Artemije appeared on the internet, and assailants shot at the priest's vehicle while he and his family drove through the Serb-majority municipality of Zvecan. Evidently in reaction to the rift, Bishop Teodosije attempted to resign from his position as the church's spokesperson in Kosovo, and a key moderate monk, Father Nektarije, left the clergy altogether. The situation has made Orthodox Kosovo Serbs increasingly tense, especially after a Kosovo police service officer and cadet were suspended in connection with the attack on the priest's vehicle. (NOTE. This is one of the cases hard-liners in the north have cited as an Albanian-inspired attack on Kosovo Serbs (Ref A). END NOTE). END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Despite their traditional religious relationship as spiritual father and son, a rift developed in 2005 between moderate Bishop Teodosije Sibalic of Lipljan, of Decani Monastery, and hard-line Bishop Artemije Radosavljevic, head of the Raska and Prizren Diocese. At the time, Artemije refused to participate in the Reconstruction Implementation Commission (RIC) developed to oversee the reconstruction of Orthodox Churches destroyed in the March 2004 riots (Ref B). Belgrade Church officials stepped in and selected Teodosije to participate on the RIC, and to represent the church in Kosovo to the international community and to the SOC Synod. The RIC successfully completed preliminary interventions in late December 2005, and tenders for the next phase of reconstruction will be launched in June and July, with work scheduled to begin this summer (Ref C).

¶3. (SBU) Relations between Artemije and Teodosije soured further when Teodosije welcomed Kosovo Albanian President Fatmir Sejdiu to Decani Monastery for Orthodox Easter on April 23, 2006 (Ref C). Several days earlier, Bishop Artemije had publicly refused Prime Minister Agim Ceku's request to visit Gracanica monastery on Orthodox Easter, saying such a visit would not be welcomed while displaced Kosovo Serbs (including Artemije himself) still cannot return to their homes.

¶4. (SBU) On April 26, Artemije blasted the decision by Decani monks to welcome Sejdiu on Easter in an article published on the diocese web site (www.eparhija-prizren.com), saying the visit took place without Artemije's blessing and created a false impression that things were improving in Kosovo. Teodosije responded in an article posted on the Decani website (www.kosovo.net), saying he had discussed the visit in advance with Artemije and Artemije agreed that a short visit and traditional Easter drink with international visitors would be acceptable. (NOTE. Marija Gavric, close family friend and former protocol assistant to Bishop Artemije told PolOff on June 9 that Artemije suffers from extremely poor health and is getting senile, often forgetting things from one day to the next. END NOTE.).

¶5. (SBU) In the statement, Teodosije said he also discussed the visit with a high official from the state institutions in Belgrade, who told Teodosije that it would not be a problem if Sejdiu visited as a guest, as long as there was no political discussion. Belgrade officials criticized Teodosije several months ago when Kosovo Albanian politician Veton Surroi visited Decani monastery as part of his outreach

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to Kosovo's minority communities.

¶6. (SBU) On April 27 the hard-line Serbian National Council (SNC) issued a press statement (published on Artemije's web site) sharply criticizing Teodosije and moderate Serb politician Oliver Ivanovic for welcoming Sejdiu to Decani on Easter, and fully endorsing Artemije's decision to refuse Ceku. The SNC stated that Teodosije was "not authorized to speak on behalf of the Christian Serbs of Kosovo, the vast majority of whom disagree" with him, and asked Teodosije and Ivanovic to "desist at once from their words and actions that give comfort and encouragement to those who seek our destruction." They also asked Teodosije and other SOC representatives not to participate in the interfaith conference that took place at the Pec Patriarchate on May 2-3, saying it was, "hollow to speak of 'dialogue' with Islamic representatives while jihad terrorists plot the destruction of Christian churches they have not already burned, blown up or desecrated."

¶7. (SBU) Showing just how out of touch the SNC is with the SOC, high level SOC representatives, including Teodosije, Metropolitan Amfilohije, hard-liner Bishop Irinej (Bulovic) of Backa, and then Heiromonk (now Bishop) Irinej (Dobrijevic), not only attended the conference, but hosted it (Ref D). Representatives of the Catholic, Islamic, Protestant and Jewish communities also participated. Artemije was notably absent. In a common statement issued afterwards, the participants acknowledged that, "all communities have suffered," they further condemned "the destruction of all churches, mosques, cemeteries and other religious sites," and commended the restoration process.

¶8. (SBU) Afterwards a letter sharply criticizing Artemije for his statements against Teodosije appeared on a Serbian Orthodox Church internet forum, purportedly signed by Father Srdjan (Stankovic), secretary of the Raska and Prizren diocese (based at Gracanica monastery), along with diocesan officials from Prizren, Pristina, Mitrovica and Gnjilane. The letter says that believers and clergy are greatly confused by the clashes in the media between Artemije and

Teodosije, and urged church leaders to be more engaged in seeking solutions. The letter praised Teodosije for everything the Decani brotherhood did for Serb and Albanian people before, during and after the conflict. The letter also criticized the fact that the "one-sided" SNC statement was sent to every priest personally.

¶19. (C) On May 6 assailants shot at Father Srdjan's vehicle while he was driving with his family through the village of Rudare, in Zvecan municipality in northern Kosovo. Senior UN Civil Police (CivPol) official Grey Ferguson confirmed to E/P Chief on June 9 that a Kosovo Police Service (KPS) special unit officer and KPS cadet were suspended on June 7 in connection with the incident. Father Sava of Decani Monastery told PolOff on June 8 that Srdjan told him that he has taken his family and left Kosovo, on advice from CivPol. (NOTE. Father Sava said he believed the attack was carried out by the same groups responsible for other recent attacks in the north, who he says are looking to force the territorial division of Kosovo (Ref E). Sava said he opposes such a division, saying it would force Serbs in the south to leave. END NOTE).

¶110. (SBU) Teodosije and Artemije both participated at the May 23 status negotiations meeting on cultural heritage in Vienna on May 23. Gavric told PolFSN that during the May 15-27 Holy Assembly in Belgrade, Bishop Teodosije attempted to resign from his position on the RIC and as the authorized spokesperson for the church on matters related to Kosovo because of the ongoing rift with Artemije. She said the assembly refused his resignation, asserting that SOC interests are beyond any individual.

¶111. (C) On June 2 USOP received an email from Father Nektarije (Isak Vorgucic), a Decani monk, saying that he was

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leaving the clergy. Vorgucic said he was leaving for entirely personal reasons (having met a woman), but would continue his work as executive director and editor-in-chief of Radio KIM. Gavric later told PolFSN, however, that Vorgucic, who is currently in Nis, actually left the clergy due to the internal dispute between Artemije and Teodosije. (NOTE. Vorgucic had been living in the Gracanica monastery compound, where Artemije also resides, because of its proximity to Radio KIM in the Serb enclave of Caglavica. END NOTE.).

¶112. (SBU) Artemije has other problems brewing as well. Gavric said the SOC is currently investigating possible misuse of diocese funds by Artemije's personal assistant and close advisor, Father Simeon. Artemije appointed Simeon Abbot of Banjska Monastery in Zvecan in 2005, and Simeon is closely associated with northern SNV hard-liners, including E.O.-listed Marko Jaksic. According to Gavric, Simeon was personally behind Artemije's refusal to participate on the RIC, because Simeon wanted all reconstruction funds to be channeled through the diocese budget, without any external oversight.

¶113. (SBU) COMMENT. The public rift in the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo is adding to the overall distress felt by Kosovo Serbs. While they are used to conflicts among political leaders, they expect more from their religious leaders. Artemije has firmly aligned himself with the hard-line SNC, and together they oppose any attempts at reconciliation with Kosovo Albanians. Despite his radical views, Artemije does have significant support among the population, many of whom have more direct contact with him in Gracanica than is possible with Teodosije in Decani. USOP has not generally sought out Artemije since his radicalization. In a June 2 meeting in Gracanica, E/P Chief and PolOff found him friendly and open, although very clearly submerged in his own political reality with a decidedly anti-Albanian vision of both recent and remote Kosovo history. END COMMENT.

¶14. (U) Post clears this message in its entirety for release to Special Envoy Ahtisaari.

GOLDBERG